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Ten Years in the 'Chicken Coop'

David T. Nelson

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In the "Chicken Coop"

On October 12, 1895, in accordance with the resolutions of the alumni, Professor Haldor Hanson was placed in charge. The museum was moved from the college main building to the nearby brick structure known as the "Chicken Coop," a building 60 x 30, of which at first only the two east rooms were set aside for the collections. These were modest enough at this time: 30 stuffed and mounted specimens; 40 butterflies and insects; 300 birds' eggs; 150 rocks and minerals; North Cape and Valdres meerscham; rocks from the Gausta mountain; relics from the Chicago and Luther College fires; Civil War relics; Luther College scrapbook from 1865; Chinese articles and idols; South African weapons; Indian clubs and arrows; a penholder from a piece of the Gokstad ship; Confederate and other paper money; 90 silver and copper coins; 2 oil paintings by Alex Grinager and 10 by Herbjørn Gausta; cast of Bjørnson by Asbjørnsen, and miscellanea.

Hanson had been engaged as a full-time music teacher for 1895-96 and had also agreed to look after the museum. The alumni association agreed to aid the museum, and President Larsen hoped it would become something more than it had been.

Our people want to hold fast that which is good in the old heritage and let it be of benefit to this new nation. Therefore, we will all guard our old memories . . . The pioneers have represented our nationality at its best, and they have brought to this new land . . . forces that should influence its history, as the Normans of the Middle Ages influenced the countries to which they came. They have already done so, and the mark they have made will never be erased.

Larsen's hope was more than fulfilled. Hanson, who possessed great talent as a collector, was zealous and tireless as the possibilities of the museum grew upon him. In October 1896 he issued an appeal for help in assembling a complete collection of newspapers, books, and other material of Norwegian-American interest. He stated that B. Anundsen, publisher of *Decorah-Posten*, had given the museum copies of everything from his press. He also reported that copies of almost everything from the Synod's press was in the museum and the college library. He suggested that if the project of gathering everything should succeed (more than 200 books and brochures had already been gathered), perhaps a history of Norwegian-American literature could be prepared. He reported that nearly 2,000 different "things" had been given the museum during the preceding twelve months. The total collection very early began to take on the character of a Norwegian-American museum and it was as such that it received its widest support.

In 1897 Hanson began to agitate for a fireproof library and museum building, but it was years before this hope was even partially fulfilled. For the period from October 13, 1895, to May 25, 1898, Hanson reported that the museum received 3,471 items as gifts and 1,183 by purchase. Hanson enlisted the interest of students; their musical organizations gave concerts for the benefit of the museum. The Luther College Alumni Association likewise gave financial support to the museum.

Missionaries who had received their early training at Luther College became interested in the museum. Thus Rev. T. L. Brevig, a pioneer Norwegian Lutheran missionary to Alaska, sent a number of artifacts from that area, including a six-foot long tooth of a mammoth. Over the years many other items came from Norwegian-American missionaries in other parts of the world.

An attempt to build up an art section for the museum was made in 1898, when the classes of 1894, '95, '96, and '97 furnished the funds for the purchase of a full-size plaster cast of the Apollo Belvidere. Subsequently, casts of other classical sculptures were obtained; but interest in these waned as the museum turned more and more to Norwegian-American materials.

Hanson had an eye for publicity. He persuaded authorities to include a cut of the building housing the museum in the catalog of the college for 1899-1900. This building was the old "Chicken Coop,"

60 x 30, two stories, which by that time was almost wholly occupied by the museum. This building, to the northwest of the old Main Building, continued in use (though not as a museum) until it was torn down in 1952.

In 1899-1900 Haldor Hanson was named Curator of the Museum, the first time this title was used. On May 15, 1900, he reported:

Since the Luther College Museum, so far as is known, is the only Norwegian museum in this country, one of its chief objectives has been to gather and preserve Norwegian-American newspaper material so far as possible. It now has 518 complete annual issues of various newspapers and a few more, more or less complete. There are more than 2,000 items in the museum library, nearly all published by Norwegian-American authors. In addition, there is a collection of old and rare books, especially Norwegian-Danish and religious books.

The Museum has a coin collection of 600 items including paper money and medals; a stamp collection of more than 4,300 different items (not displayed because of lack of room). In a photograph collection there are 124 photographs of Norwegian-American pastors, teachers, journalists, and several others; 180 photographs of churches, schools, and parsonages, 30 photographs of groups from Luther College, etc.

In the natural history section there are 150 mounted birds, 38 fish, 35 animals; a small collection of insects; 975 birds' eggs; about 1,000 shells; 33 specimens of coral; about 200 specimens of minerals and ores; many fossils; 30 varieties of seed; a herbarium of about 500 specimens (not displayed for lack of room); a cross-section of a large spruce from Oregon.

In the ethnological section there are somewhat more than 400 Indian artifacts, like arrowheads, stone axes, trinkets of beads, etc.; about 100 articles from Alaska; a collection of weapons and poison arrows from the South Seas Islands; a number of articles from South Africa, China, and Japan.

The Museum has made a special effort to gather a collection of Norwegian materials, older and newer, examples of Norwegian fine and domestic arts. Much of this was brought to America by immigrants, and it is important to rescue as much of this as possible before it is too late.

A beginning has been made of an art collection, notably with Mr. Gausta's large and splendid painting, "Closing the Bargain." A plaster cast of the Apollo Belvidere and 21 plaster masks are also found here.

Dr. L. Cadwell of Decorah has kindly turned over to the Museum his collection of minerals and a cabinet. . . . The Museum's collections are displayed in 200 frames under glass — in 10 glass wallcases and 17 "show" cases.

Much good will has been shown toward the Museum in these years, and it has received many handsome gifts. But it has been necessary for its growth and development not to rely only on gifts which may fortuitously come to the collection, but also to purchase some things — and even to buy more than, strictly speaking, its means permitted, in order to promote, enlarge, or complete a given area.

On June 19, 1901, a faculty building committee reported that more room was needed for the library, museum, and music. On March 24, 1902, Hanson announced a subscription of \$280 toward a new building, presumably to serve the museum.

On May 15, 1902, the faculty resolved that a library-museum building of fireproof construction was the first need of the college. On June 17, 1902, Hanson's resignation as curator was announced to the faculty.

Apparently a considerable difference of opinion had arisen concerning the priority to be given to certain college projects. There was also a change of administration, President C. K. Preus succeeding President Laur. Larsen, who resigned. In any event, the gymnasium was enlarged in 1902-1903, and the library-museum building was not constructed. Hanson's duties as curator came to an end. On September 16, 1902, U. V. Koren, the President of the Synod, sent a letter to Hanson, thanking him for his great services to the museum and enclosing a check of \$200 as a gift.

Haldor Hanson's departure was a great loss. Almost single-handedly, he had aroused interest and enthusiasm in the project. Making influential persons aware of the significance of the museum, he had obtained hundreds of artifacts and considerable financial support. He had set before the museum the task of gathering all that would throw light on the contributions of those of Norwegian descent to this country. In doing this he gave the museum a direction which it thereafter never lost and set it on the course which has made it the foremost Norwegian-American institution of its kind in this country.